The Paradox of Becoming

An Abridged Guide

Based on the teachings of the Buddha as presented by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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Preface

Becoming (*bhava*) is one of the most important — and least explained — concepts in the Buddha's teaching. It sits at the center of the four noble truths: craving that leads to renewed becoming is named as the cause of suffering, and the end of suffering therefore requires the end of becoming. But the second noble truth also lists craving for *non*-becoming as one of the three forms of craving to be abandoned. This creates a real practical puzzle: if wanting existence to continue is a problem, and wanting existence to stop is *also* a problem, how can anyone practice their way out of suffering at all?

This abridgment follows the original book's central claim: the Buddha did not resolve this paradox by redefining words. He resolved it strategically, by creating a special kind of becoming — a steady, alert state of mind (concentration, or jhāna) — that can watch phenomena arise and pass away without craving either their continuation or their destruction. Becoming is used to end becoming. The path is itself a state of becoming that, once it has done its work, can be allowed to dissolve.

The chapters below track the original structure: two stories illustrating becoming, two analogies explaining how it is produced, three levels on which it occurs, four types of clinging that fuel it, two failed strategies (plus one

adapted one) for ending it, the successful strategy the Buddha actually taught, and finally, a description of what lies beyond it — a state with no location and no limitation at all.

Introduction

We all live in the same physical world, but each of us inhabits a different experienced world, shaped by what we want from it. A painter, a skier, and a miner standing on the same mountainside see three different mountains, because each brings a different desire to the scene. And the same person moves between such worlds constantly — sometimes over years, sometimes in an instant.

The Buddha's word for this phenomenon — a felt identity operating inside a world organized around a particular desire — is *bhava*, "becoming." It is better rendered as "becoming" than "being," because it names a process rather than a fixed metaphysical state. Becoming is something *produced*, moment to moment, by craving; it is not a ground we emerge from.

Crucially, the Buddha found that this process of becoming operates on two scales at once. The same mechanism by which the mind creates a momentary sense of "who I am, here, now" is the mechanism by which it takes on a new identity after death, in a new realm. Watching becoming arise and pass away in meditation is, on this view, a direct way of understanding rebirth — not by taking it on faith, but by observing the same causal process at a small scale that operates at a cosmic one.

The Buddha also discovered that the craving and clinging that produce suffering are identical to the craving and clinging that produce becoming. This is why the ordinary human strategy for escaping suffering — trade one identity or situation for another — can never fully work. Becoming a miner instead of a painter doesn't remove stress; it just changes its flavor.

He described the process of becoming with an agricultural image: kamma (intentional action, past and present) is a *field*; consciousness is a *seed*; and craving is the *moisture* that lets the seed sprout into a full state of becoming, centered on a particular spot in that field.

Here is where the paradox bites. The craving that waters the seed doesn't have to be craving *for* what's growing — it can just as easily be a craving to destroy or escape it. Wanting a bad situation to end is still an act of watering. So the very desire to stop becoming can produce more of it.

The Buddha's solution was to use this same mechanism strategically: to create a state of becoming — deep meditative absorption (jhāna) — that could observe the potentials thrown up by kamma without watering them, whether with the desire to keep them or the desire to destroy them. Eventually, once every other seed has been deprived of moisture, that strategic state of

becoming can be deprived of moisture as well, and what's left — if anything is — is not itself a state of becoming at all.

The book's argument unfolds through seven chapters, corresponding to seven passages the author treats as its structural spine:

1. The Buddha's first sermon — the paradox and its strategic resolution stated in outline.
2. Two field analogies explaining how becoming is produced.
3. A description of the three levels on which becoming occurs.
4. A passage detailing the strategy for avoiding both craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming.
5. A passage on the paradoxical element in that strategy — concentration itself being a type of becoming.
6. A passage on the mode of perception, based on concentration, that carries the strategy through.
7. An analogy for consciousness once it has been freed from all the limitations of becoming.

Chapter 1: Two Stories

The Buddha never gives a single formal definition of *bhava*. Instead, its meaning has to be pieced together from how it functions inside his broader teaching on dependent co-arising, where craving and clinging condition becoming, and becoming in turn conditions birth, aging, illness, and death.

Two features stand out. First, becoming is not a metaphysical foundation — not "Being" in a philosophical sense — but an ongoing, repeatedly-produced event, arising from a network of causes. Second, becoming operates as a hinge between the purely psychological (craving, clinging, identity) and processes that show up on a cosmic scale (birth, death, whole realms of existence). The Buddha moves freely between these two registers, and two of his cosmological narratives make the connection vivid.

The story of the first Brahmā. After a long period of cosmic contraction, the world begins to evolve again. Beings dwelling in a radiant, formless state eventually — through the exhaustion of merit or lifespan — fall and reappear in an empty palace at the heart of the newly-forming cosmos. The first being to arrive, lonely, wishes for company; when other beings duly arrive (through the unrelated exhaustion of their own kamma), he concludes that his wish caused their arrival, and comes to believe himself their creator — the origin,

the author of the "creator god" idea found in other religious traditions. This story shows how a shift in becoming (falling from one plane to another) can occur through the exhaustion of old kamma, while a further, purely interpretive shift in becoming (mistakenly believing oneself a creator) can occur through a new act of craving and clinging — in this case, clinging to a flattering self-view.

The story of the flavor-earth. In a second, more allegorical account, newly-arrived beings after a cosmic contraction exist for a long time as radiant, sexless, mind-made beings floating above an endless, lightless ocean. A sweet-tasting film ("flavor-earth") forms on the water's surface. One curious being tastes it with a finger, becomes enamored, and others follow. As their craving takes hold and they begin greedily consuming the flavor-earth with their hands, their self-luminosity vanishes — and the sun, moon, seasons, and physical differentiation of the world all appear as a direct consequence. Later, some beings grow proud of their better coloring and look down on others; this pride, not any real inferiority in the others, is what the Buddha says caused the eventual degeneration of the world (a story originally told to rebuff a brahman caste's claims of racial superiority).

The two stories divide labor: the first shows how a change of becoming can happen mostly through old kamma finally ripening; the second shows how a change of becoming, sparked entirely by present craving, can restructure not just one's inner experience but the very physical world one experiences. This mirrors something anyone who has struggled with addiction will recognize: as a craving takes hold, one's sense of self reorganizes around it, and the world itself seems to reorganize to match — narrowing to whatever helps or hinders satisfying the craving. When the craving finally loosens, both the self and the world it inhabited change together.

Becoming among the lists of what is overcome. Pāli texts group *bhava* among several standard lists describing what a fully awakened person (an arahant) has left behind: it is one of the three effluents (āsavas), one of the four floods (oghas), one of the four yokes (yogas), and one of the seven underlying obsessions (anusayas). Though it does not appear by name among the ten standard fetters, a recurring formula describes the arahant as having "destroyed the fetter of becoming." These lists confirm that becoming is regarded as something to be transcended, but on their own they say nothing about what the term actually names — which is why the narrative material

examined in this chapter, rather than any dictionary-style definition, is where its meaning has to be found.

A modern parallel. The author draws a deliberately down-to-earth comparison: people recovering from addiction often describe exactly this dynamic. While the addiction holds, one's sense of self organizes around obtaining the substance, and the surrounding world seems to narrow to whatever helps or blocks that goal. When the addiction finally loosens its grip, both the felt self and the felt world change together — not because the physical world changed, but because the field of craving that had been organizing the experience of it fell away. This is offered as an accessible, everyday illustration of the same mechanism the cosmological stories describe on a grand scale.

Chapter 2: Two Analogies

The Buddha's central image for how becoming is produced: *kamma is the field, consciousness is the seed, and craving is the moisture.*

The field (kamma). Kamma is complex both as a word and as a fact. Sometimes it means intentional action itself; sometimes it means the results of past intentional action (old kamma) as experienced through the six senses. Crucially, old and new kamma are inseparably intertwined: even the raw sensory data delivered by past kamma is filtered, in the present, by acts of attention and interpretation that are themselves fresh kamma. The Buddha strongly rejected pure determinism — the view that everything experienced is simply the ripening of the past — because that view removes any incentive to act skillfully now. He illustrated the variable weight of kamma with the image of a lump of salt: dropped in a small cup, it ruins the water; dropped in the Ganges, it makes no difference at all. A person of small, undeveloped character is more strongly affected by a given unskillful act than someone of large, well-developed character, because it is present-moment mental cultivation that determines how much a given piece of old kamma matters.

The seed (consciousness). Sense-consciousness (eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, and so on) is not a stable essence but a dependently-arisen

event, as unstable as the conditions that give rise to it. Because becoming grows from this seed, it necessarily inherits its instability — one more reason becoming is inherently stressful. Consciousness appears twice in the standard causal sequence of dependent co-arising (once prior to name-and-form, once implicit in contact), which reflects the nested, recursive quality of becoming: one state of becoming (say, a daydream) can arise nested inside another (waking human life), which is nested inside another (an entire lifetime), each level generating its own instability and, typically, its own suffering.

The moisture (craving). Craving is defined not just as wanting, but specifically as a *locating* function — "relishing now here, now there." It picks a spot in the field of kamma to settle on. Several early texts describe craving as a seamstress, stitching a self together at a chosen point, the way a button is sewn onto a particular spot of cloth. Craving is inseparable from delight; wherever there is delight in form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness, there is clinging, and clinging plus craving together constitute the "origination of stress" of the second noble truth. Because craving and clinging are notoriously erratic — the Buddha said he could find no adequate simile for how quickly the mind can reverse itself — this fickleness compounds the instability already built into the field and the seed.

A second version of the analogy appears elsewhere: the ground is described as the first four aggregates (form, feeling, perception, fabrications), the seed as consciousness together with its nutriment, and the moisture as delight. Rather than contradicting the first analogy, this version adds emphasis: conditionality itself, in the Buddha's teaching, is best pictured as an act of *feeding*. He drove this point home with three deliberately unsettling images — a starving couple forced to eat their own child to survive a desert crossing (physical food); a flayed cow being chewed on from every direction by whatever creatures happen to be near it (contact); a man being dragged toward a pit of glowing coals (intention); and a prisoner stabbed with a hundred spears three times a day (consciousness). These images are meant to produce dispassion for the very process of feeding that keeps becoming alive, not simply to describe it neutrally.

Where the paradox becomes unavoidable. "Craving for non-becoming" — wanting some existing thing to end or be destroyed — still counts as an act of watering the field, because it still involves clinging to present intentional activity aimed at that spot. Wanting equanimity toward an unpleasant situation, in anticipation of the peace that equanimity will bring, is subtler but no different in kind: intention plus delight in the intention is still moisture,

and moisture still produces a seedling — a fresh state of becoming — even if the resulting state is peaceful.

The instability of the causal principle itself. Underlying both versions of the field analogy is a general formula: when this exists, that exists; from the arising of this comes the arising of that; when this does not exist, that does not exist; from the ceasing of this comes the ceasing of that. This formula can be read on two timescales at once — as connecting events separated by a lapse of time (a feeling arising now, an emotional reaction to it arising later), and as connecting events happening together in the same instant (a contact and the feeling that immediately accompanies it). The Buddha called his ability to perceive this second, subtler pattern a genuine "breakthrough of discernment," which suggests how difficult it is to see directly. Because both timescales are always operating together, any given experience is shaped by an intricate mesh of past and present causes — which is one more reason no state of becoming, however pleasant, can be relied upon to hold still.

Kamma as both ground and self-renewing fuel. Just as decaying plant matter fertilizes the very soil that produced it, new kamma generated in the present becomes old kamma available to nourish future states of becoming — meaning the field, left untended, is potentially inexhaustible. This is precisely

why the third ingredient, craving, matters so much strategically: the field's possibilities cannot by themselves produce suffering; they require the moisture of craving to be activated. Deprive the field of that moisture and its potentials simply remain potentials, never actualized into a fresh birth, a fresh identity, a fresh round of stress.

This sets up the strategic problem explored in the rest of the book: since even the desire to destroy or transcend becoming feeds becoming, any successful path has to include, and ultimately outgrow, this very mechanism. Not every state of becoming can serve this function — a life saturated in sensual pursuit, in trauma, or in confusion steals the "moisture" that the path would otherwise use; so, too, does a life that depends on causing harm to other beings simply to stay alive. Identifying which kinds of becoming, clinging, and craving *can* serve the path, and which cannot, is the task of the next two chapters.

Chapter 3: Three Levels

When the texts classify becoming, they name three levels: **sensuality-becoming**, **form-becoming**, and **formless-becoming** — corresponding to whether the mind is absorbed in ordinary sense experience, in the refined absorption of the four jhānas, or in the still more refined "formless" absorptions built on those jhānas. Each level is produced by kamma of a matching degree of refinement, and each is shaped, at root, by an act of perception: a perception of sensuality, a perception of form, or a perception of one of the four formless spheres (infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither-perception-nor-non-perception).

"Sensuality" (kāma) in its technical sense does not mean sense pleasure itself but *passion for sensual resolves* — the habitual pull toward planning and fantasizing about sense pleasure, which is why the term covers sensual frustration as much as sensual gratification.

"Form" (rūpa) can mean either visual imagery or the felt, whole-body sense of embodiment cultivated in the jhānas — the "kneaded ball of moist bath powder" and "spring-fed lake" similes used to describe the first two jhānas convey a fully saturated bodily awareness rather than an escape from the body.

"Formless" (arūpa) covers four increasingly refined states built by systematically dropping perceptions: of form, then of the boundary of space itself, then of the boundedness of consciousness, then of "somethingness" altogether, arriving finally at neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Because the human mind can move through all three levels within minutes, the human realm — though classified as "sensual" — is uniquely capable of tasting every level of becoming the cosmos has to offer. This gives human life its double edge: no other realm offers such a rich range of possible states of becoming to observe and work with, but no other realm offers such a rich range of possible distractions either.

Ethical texture of the three levels. Skillful sensual kamma (generosity, virtue) yields pleasant results, both immediately (a good reputation, ease in company) and, potentially, in future favorable rebirths in agreeable sensual realms. Unskillful sensual kamma (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, intoxication) yields painful results and can close off entirely the possibility of ever attaining the refined states of form and formlessness — not because the pleasures those unskillful acts sometimes bring are themselves an obstacle, but because clinging to them is. Vivid canonical descriptions of hell realms (the "Six Spheres of Contact" hell of universally undesirable sense data, the

layered tortures of the Great Hell) and of animal rebirths (dung-eaters, filth-dwellers) illustrate the far end of unskillful sensual kamma; equally vivid descriptions of heavenly pleasure (surpassing even a legendary universal emperor's by an incomparable margin) illustrate its skillful end.

Kamma of form and formlessness — the cultivation of jhāna, or of the four "divine abidings" (goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity) — yields correspondingly more refined pleasure, both in this life and, if one dies still absorbed in such a state, in matching Brahmā realms after death, with lifespans measured in eons.

The complexity of kammic timing. The results of a given action may ripen right away, later in the same life, or only in lives to come — and because a person performs some form of kamma with virtually every choice, the accumulated threads of causality quickly become too tangled to track with precision. The texts acknowledge this directly: sometimes a person who has clearly acted in harmful ways is seen enjoying good fortune, and a person who has clearly acted with integrity is seen suffering misfortune. Rather than treating this as evidence against the principle of kamma, the texts explain it as a matter of timing — earlier or later skillful and unskillful actions ripening out of the expected order, or a decisive shift in view occurring at the moment of

death. The general tendency of cause and effect holds; only the precise scheduling is, for an unawakened observer, impossible to fully predict.

Generosity given with different motives. A more granular passage distinguishes several possible motives behind an act of giving, and matches each to a different kammic result. Giving purely to store up reward for oneself after death leads to rebirth among a lower class of deva; giving simply because "giving is good" leads to a higher class; giving out of family custom, out of a sense of one's own comparative wealth, in emulation of the great sacrifices of past sages, or because the act itself brings a serene and joyful mind, each lead to correspondingly higher heavenly rebirths — though every one of these motives, however elevated, still results eventually in a "returner," someone who comes back again to this world once the kammic reward is used up. The implicit contrast is with generosity practiced alongside the insight discussed in later chapters, which does not simply purchase a better rebirth but contributes directly to the ending of rebirth altogether.

Lifespans of the Brahmā realms. The texts are strikingly precise about the comparative duration of rebirths tied to each jhāna: a being who dies still absorbed in the first jhāna, or in the parallel cultivation of goodwill, is said to arise in the company of Brahmā's retinue for a full eon; the second jhāna

(paired with compassion) yields two eons among the Radiant devas; the third (paired with empathetic joy) yields four eons among the Beautiful Black devas; and the fourth (paired with equanimity) yields five hundred eons among the Sky-fruit devas. The scale of these numbers is meant to underline both how genuinely powerful skillful becoming can be, and — since even five hundred eons eventually runs out — how even the most durable happiness available within the field of kamma remains, in the end, temporary. (2) every level still places limits on what can be experienced and done — severest in the case of unskillful sensual kamma, which is why generosity and virtue form the very beginning of the Buddhist path for everyone, regardless of their ultimate aim; and (3) no matter how refined or long-lasting, none of these happinesses is permanent, because they all still depend on conditions that are themselves impermanent. A further, practical consequence follows from the fact that the human mind alone can range across all three levels: if properly focused, it can watch states of becoming form and dissolve in real time, gaining direct insight into the process — which is exactly why jhāna, a form-level attainment fully accessible to human beings, becomes the ideal vantage point for the path. But that same range also means the mind must stay heedful, since causal factors that look harmless can just as easily pull it back down into less useful levels of becoming. This is why the Buddha concluded that reliable happiness can only

be found by ending becoming altogether — but to end it, one first has to see clearly how it is formed, which is the subject taken up next.

Chapter 4: Four Clingings

If craving locates a spot in the field of kamma, clinging is the act that turns that location into a felt sense of self. Four types of clinging are named: **clinging to sensuality**, **clinging to views**, **clinging to habits and practices**, and **clinging to doctrines of self**.

A crucial and easily-missed point: the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, consciousness) are not the Buddha's answer to "what we are." They are his analysis of the *raw material* from which a sense of self can be fabricated, moment by moment, wherever craving happens to land. A sense of self can form around any single aggregate, around several combined, and can be finite or infinite, formed or formless — even an experience of infinite, boundless bliss still counts as a located state of becoming if a sense of self has coalesced around it. Because craving lands "now here, now there," a person's sense of self can shift completely from one moment to the next — absorbed in abstract thought one moment, defined by sudden thirst the next.

Clinging to sensuality is illustrated with a deliberately unflattering image: a dung-beetle proud of its pile of dung, standing in for a monk who boasts of his popularity and material support while looking down on more modest peers. Passages describe both the pain of frustrated sensual desire and the endless

drawbacks of pursuing it — labor, anxiety over loss, the disputes it provokes between family members and nations, and its role in driving people to crime and its punishments. Clinging to sensuality can also foreclose entirely the possibility of even conceiving that a happiness beyond sense pleasure might exist, illustrated by the parable of the wealthy man, unencumbered by attachments, who can freely go forth as a renunciant, contrasted with the poor man whose few meager possessions form, paradoxically, an even stronger snare precisely because he cannot bear to part with them.

Clinging to views is shown to distort experience whether the view is held with confidence or with doubt. A householder's reply to a group of debating wanderers makes the point sharply: any fixed philosophical position about the nature of the cosmos or the self, however confidently held, is itself a fabricated, impermanent, and therefore stressful thing to be attached to. Determinism, theistic creationism, and pure acausalism are each shown to remove any motivation for skillful effort, since all three, in their different ways, deny that present choices matter. Doubt is shown to be just as capable of causing suffering as false certainty — illustrated by a person who, lacking confidence in the teaching, is overcome with terror and grief when facing serious illness.

Clinging to habits and practices covers both formal precepts and simple habitual behavior, skillful or not. The danger here is illustrated by monks who take pride in ascetic practices (living in the wilderness, eating once a day, wearing rag-robes) and use that pride to look down on others — the practice itself may be skillful, but clinging to it as a badge of identity corrupts it. Two more extended stories — a dog-practice ascetic and a naked ascetic, an actor who believes his craft earns heavenly rebirth, and a professional soldier who believes dying in battle earns the same — are used to show how a *wrong view* about what a given practice leads to can turn even sincere effort into a cause for a bad rebirth.

Clinging to self-doctrines covers every possible way of conceiving a self — possessed of form or formless, finite or infinite — whether that conception affirms a self or explicitly denies one (since denying a self still requires first defining what is being denied). Rather than refuting one specific brahmanical position, the Buddha's critique is built to cover every conceivable self-doctrine, because the religious landscape of his time (and, implicitly, of any time) offered many competing definitions of self, not one. The chapter also flags an important case examined more closely later: monks who, trying to eliminate self-view by aiming at "I should not be, it should not be mine," can

end up simply relocating their clinging onto a very refined kind of equanimity — still a state of becoming, just an exceptionally subtle one.

Two illustrative stories. The dangers of sensuality-clinging are dramatized in two well-known narratives. In one, the monk Nanda confesses he can no longer bear monastic life because he cannot stop thinking of a woman he glimpsed while leaving home. The Buddha responds not by lecturing him on restraint but by taking him, through psychic power, to view five hundred celestial nymphs — next to whom, Nanda readily admits, the woman he had been pining for looks like a disfigured monkey. Nanda agrees to continue practicing purely for the promised reward. The story is often read as gently ironic: the Buddha meets Nanda's sensual craving on its own terms rather than condemning it outright, using a still-greater sensual incentive to keep him on a path that will, eventually, dissolve the craving itself. In the second story, Prince Jayasena refuses to believe that sustained meditation could possibly produce genuine "singleness of mind," and the Buddha's diagnosis is blunt: someone still consumed by, chewed on by, and burning with the fever of sensual thought cannot be expected to know or see what only renunciation can reveal — his very saturation in sensuality has foreclosed the concept.

Two illustrative stories on view-clinging. A separate pair of stories shows how clinging to a view can distort experience in the present, independent of whether the view later proves accurate. A disciple whose teacher holds that anyone who has ever killed, stolen, or lied is destined for hell may become consumed with dread simply from believing this doctrine, regardless of whether it is true. And when a hostile questioner tries to trap the Buddha into admitting that touring the countryside during a famine harms the families he passes through, the Buddha calmly lists the actual causes of a family's ruin — kings, thieves, fire, flood, mismanagement, a wastrel heir, and simple impermanence — and warns that anyone who persists in blaming him despite the evidence is, by clinging to that view, laying the ground for their own unhappy rebirth. Because the field of possibilities a person draws their sense of self from is the very same field they draw their sense of the world from, a shift in one always accompanies a shift in the other — the same insight illustrated cosmologically back in Chapter One. A well-known exchange defines "the world" itself not as a fixed container but as whatever is subject to disintegration: the eye, forms, eye-consciousness, eye-contact, and whatever pleasant, painful, or neutral feeling arises from that contact — and likewise for each of the other five senses. "World," on this reading, names a process of coming apart, not a stable arena that self and other simply occupy.

Three cross-cutting themes tie the four clingings together: *anticipation* (every act of clinging is driven by a hoped-for result, itself resting on an implicit view of cause and effect); *mutuality* (every act of clinging to one of the four types inevitably drags in elements of the other three — a person's sense of self, their habits, and their views are always mutually entangled); and *limitation* (clinging narrows both what can be experienced now and what can be done in the future, and even the most refined and fortunate clinging is ultimately unreliable, since anything it produces is impermanent). Because clinging is what turns raw kammic potential into an actual felt identity, and because every form of clinging carries its own share of suffering, the path to end suffering has no choice but to work directly with clinging itself — using it skillfully, rather than pretending it can simply be bypassed.

Chapter 5: Two Incorrect Paths, One Incomplete

Before describing the successful strategy, the tradition preserves the Buddha's own assessment of approaches that fell short — instructive precisely because they show which forms of misunderstanding the correct path had to avoid.

The cosmic self. Some held that identifying the self with the entire cosmos across all time would escape the limitations of any narrower, located self. The Buddha rejected this bluntly, even mockingly, calling it "a fool's teaching." His reasoning: genuine self-identification requires a meaningful degree of control, and no one has control over the entire cosmos, so the claim is empty — and anyone actually holding it would still have to rely on ordinary, narrower self-definitions just to function day to day. Worse, the craving and clinging that produce even a claimed "cosmic" identity still fasten onto one particular psychological event (a specific feeling or thought) in the moment of identification — so the strategy doesn't even achieve the escape from a located self that it promises.

Why control matters to the critique. The author draws out an implication of the Buddha's dismissal of the cosmic-self view that is easy to miss on a first reading. The very notion of "self" only has practical meaning where there is some possibility of exercising control for the sake of one's own happiness —

otherwise the word does no work. A cosmic self, by definition, would require control over literally everything, which is transparently impossible for any actual being to claim; the view therefore doesn't just overreach, it undermines its own coherence. And because a person holding this view still has to eat, walk, and make ordinary decisions using an ordinary, narrower sense of self, the cosmic-self doctrine ends up requiring exactly the kind of covert, unacknowledged self-fashioning it was meant to transcend — making it, in the author's phrase, built on an inherent contradiction and a kind of unacknowledged self-dishonesty.

The dog-practice and cow-practice ascetics. A further illustration of clinging to habits and practices without genuine understanding is given in the case of two ascetics who have taken on animal-imitating disciplines — one modeling his behavior on a dog, the other on an ox — apparently believing that sufficiently thorough imitation of a given creature's habits will secure a favorable rebirth. Pressed three times to answer despite his evident reluctance, the Buddha finally explains that whoever perfects such a practice without any accompanying wrong view about its purpose is reborn, unremarkably, in the company of that same kind of animal; but whoever perfects it while holding the view that it will lead to a heavenly rebirth ends

up, because of that additional wrong view, in hell instead. The lesson generalizes: a practice's outcome depends not only on the practice itself but on the view held about what the practice is for — which is why "clinging to habits and practices" and "clinging to views" are treated as inseparable in practice, however cleanly they can be distinguished in theory.

Two performers' painful discoveries. Two closely parallel stories make the same point from a different angle. An actor who has been taught, as an item of traditional craft-lore, that entertaining a festival crowd earns rebirth among "laughing devas," and a professional soldier who has likewise been taught that dying in battle earns rebirth among devas "slain in battle," are each told — after repeatedly pressing the Buddha for an answer he initially declines to give — that the opposite is true: intoxicated by their own passion, aversion, or delusion, and having intoxicated their audiences or their enemies in turn, each is instead liable to a hellish or animal rebirth if the underlying wrong view is held. Both men are said to weep on hearing this, not out of anger at the Buddha, but from the realization that they had been "deceived, cheated, and fooled" for a long time by an inherited tradition they had never thought to question.

The Niganṭhas (Jains) held that all pleasure and pain result strictly from past physical action, and that liberation could be achieved by enduring pain without generating new action, thereby burning off the entire store of old kamma until nothing remained. The Buddha's central objection: this view ignores the role of present intention in shaping experience. He pointed out to a group of Niganṭhas that the very pain they felt from their ascetic practices varied with how vigorously they exerted themselves in the present moment — direct evidence that present kamma, not only past kamma, was in play. Because the approach depends on willfully ignoring what's happening in the present, it can't produce the kind of useful, self-aware state of becoming that insight requires. This is one of the two extremes — self-torment — that the Buddha explicitly warned against in his first sermon.

A viewpoint the Buddha adapted rather than rejected. A third position, held by non-Buddhist meditators aiming at non-becoming, ran roughly: "I should not be, and nothing should occur to me; I will not be, nothing will occur to me." The Buddha called this "the supreme viewpoint external to the Dhamma," because — unlike the first two positions — it does have the useful effect of making becoming unattractive and its cessation attractive. But held on its own, it still doesn't lead to freedom, because even beings who hold it are

still subject to change; something about the view itself remains unstable. A dialogue between the Buddha and Ānanda spells out why: two monks might each adopt something close to this viewpoint and settle into deep equanimity, but only one of them reaches full liberation. The one who fails does so because he relishes and clings to the resulting equanimity itself — which lands him, ironically, in "the supreme clinging": rebirth in the most refined possible state of becoming, the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. The one who succeeds simply doesn't cling to the equanimity, and so passes fully beyond becoming.

The lesson drawn from all three cases is the same: the desire to end becoming, by itself, is not enough to end ignorance about becoming — and unexamined ignorance about becoming just relocates itself into ever-subtler forms. What was needed instead was a viewpoint that watches "what has come to be" simply as it has come to be, without either delighting in it or delighting in its destruction — the third alternative developed fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: One Way Out

The knowledge that constituted the Buddha's Awakening is described in the Pāli sources as knowledge and vision of things "as they have come to be" (*yathā-bhūta*) — a phrase that plays on the very word for becoming (*bhūta*, the past participle of *bhavati*). A well-known passage sets out three possible responses to becoming: some people simply **adhere** to it, delighting in it and resisting any teaching aimed at its cessation. Others **slip right past** it, developing a craving for annihilation instead — delight in the idea that the self will simply be destroyed at death. A third group, "those with vision," **see what has come to be as what has come to be** — and on the strength of that clear seeing, develop disenchantment, dispassion, and eventually the cessation of what has come to be, without ever forming a delight in either its continuation or its destruction.

This third alternative requires, practically, a particular vantage point from which to observe — and the vantage point the Buddha identified is concentration, specifically the four jhānas. "Develop concentration," he told his students; "a concentrated monk discerns things as they have come to be." This is the paradoxical heart of the whole book: reaching the end of becoming

requires, as an intermediate step, deliberately cultivating a skillful state of becoming.

Why jhāna specifically. Jhāna offers a form of pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality — which matters enormously, because without some higher, competing source of well-being, the mind has no real alternative to sensual craving no matter how clearly it sees sensuality's drawbacks. The Buddha's own account of his path to Awakening turns on this exact realization: recalling a spontaneous experience of the first jhāna as a child, he understood that this — not further self-mortification — was the way forward, and that he needn't be afraid of a pleasure unconnected to sensuality or unskillful states. A famous simile compares an unsocialized wild elephant, irritated constantly by the herd, finding relief and ease only once it withdraws to solitude — likening ordinary crowded, sense-saturated existence to the herd, and jhāna's four levels (and the four formless attainments beyond them) to progressively deeper solitude.

Jhāna also gives the mind hands-on, repeated practice in observing exactly how the five aggregates and the field-seed-moisture mechanism operate — because building and sustaining a jhāna requires actively managing perception, feeling, and mental fabrication in real time. The classic description

of the first jhāna (rapture and pleasure "kneaded" through the body like moistened bath powder) makes vivid the degree of active, skillful management involved. As one moves between successive jhānas and formless attainments, one directly observes the stilling of one kind of fabrication after another — speech, then thought, then the breath itself, then perception — providing a graduated tour through the very machinery that produces becoming.

Weaning the mind from sensuality. Because sensual passion is the one form of clinging directly incompatible with jhāna, the path requires it to be set aside — but not by force of will alone, and not by rejecting sense pleasure altogether. The Buddha noted that jhāna itself cannot arise in a body weakened by a genuine lack of food, so a reasonable degree of sensual comfort remains part of the path; the danger is that "reasonable comfort" can quietly disguise renewed sensual passion. His practical test: notice, honestly, whether living according to one's preferences causes skillful qualities to grow or decline, and adjust accordingly, without swinging into needless self-denial. The comparison with the Nigaṇṭhas from the previous chapter is instructive: where they mistook all discomfort for spiritual progress, the Buddha's test is

empirical and qualitative — does this level of ease help or hinder skillful development, right now.

Two kinds of desire, tamed rather than denied. The path deliberately makes use of desire in two distinct ways. As an overall orientation, one is encouraged to want the goal itself — the end of renewed becoming. As a tactical tool, one generates specific desire for the abandoning of unskillful qualities and the cultivation of skillful ones, exactly as named in the factor of right effort. A well-known exchange between Ānanda and a skeptical brahman addresses the apparent paradox of "abandoning desire by means of desire" with a simple, everyday comparison: the desire to reach a park is naturally allayed once the park is reached: it doesn't need to be forcibly suppressed, only fulfilled and then let go of. In just the same way, whatever desire first motivated someone to seek the end of all craving is itself allayed once that goal is reached — making the path a road with a genuine terminus, not an endless, self-defeating loop. The same logic is applied elsewhere to conceit: the thought "if others have reached full liberation, why not me?" can function as a healthy, motivating form of self-confidence, relied upon early on and later let go of once it has done its work.

Combining concentration with insight. On its own, jhāna is simply another (if very refined) form of becoming; it needs to be joined to right view to become part of the path to the *end* of becoming. Once joined, meditators are taught to apply a series of deliberately corrosive perceptions to every possible object of clinging: inconstancy, stress, not-self, unattractiveness (applied to the body), the drawbacks of even the most refined states, and the undesirability of all fabrications altogether. These are not offered as comprehensive metaphysical claims about reality — pleasure is also real, and some degree of control is also real, or the very idea of a path would be pointless — but as targeted tools, applied where beneficial and timely, meant to loosen the mind's habitual infatuation with whatever it fastens onto.

Among these, the perception of **not-self** does the most decisive work, because it can be applied not just to sense objects but to the path's own skillful qualities — even to the equanimity of the highest formless attainments, and even, at the very last stage, to the experience of the deathless itself. This prevents the exact failure diagnosed in the previous chapter: clinging quietly relocating itself onto ever more refined ground. The key supporting concept here is **non-fashioning** (*atammayatā*): rather than exalting oneself for an attainment (as a "person of no integrity" does, boasting of having reached a

jhāna others haven't), a "person of integrity" recognizes that any attainment, however it's construed, will already have changed by the time it's grasped — and so declines to fashion an identity around it at all, neither exalting nor disparaging.

Applied fully, this process eventually removes the very ground on which "existence" or "non-existence" could be asserted about the world at all. A well-known dialogue captures the resulting stance succinctly: when the arising of the world is truly seen, the thought of its non-existence simply doesn't occur; when its cessation is truly seen, the thought of its existence doesn't occur either — leaving one free of the entangling categories both of "being" and of "not being."

The raft, not a possession. When the Buddha's own students confirmed, point by point, that they had seen with right discernment how things come to be, how they come to be from a specific nutriment, and how they cease when that nutriment ceases, he asked a pointed follow-up question: if they were to latch onto, cherish, and treasure this view — however pure and bright — would they still be treating the teaching as a raft for crossing over, rather than something to hold onto for its own sake? They answered no. This is why the third alternative described above is offered as a tool, not a metaphysical

conclusion to be defended: once it has done its work of removing delight in both becoming and non-becoming, it too is meant to be set down.

Non-fashioning in practice. The concept of non-fashioning (atammayatā) is illustrated most concretely through equanimity itself. Ordinary equanimity toward the many objects of the six senses is called equanimity "dependent on multiplicity"; the more refined equanimity of the formless attainments is equanimity "dependent on singleness." The instruction is to use the more refined equanimity to let go of the coarser — and then, crucially, to use non-fashioning itself to let go of even that refined equanimity, rather than stopping partway and quietly making a home there. A monk who does this all the way through, the texts say, "does not construe anything, does not construe anywhere, does not construe in any way" — the complete opposite of the "person of no integrity" who boasts of a jhāna attainment and privately measures himself against those who haven't reached it.

Watching the aggregates arise and pass, factor by factor. A famous account of the disciple Sāriputta describes him entering the first jhāna and then, while still absorbed in it, "ferreting out" each individual quality present — directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, unification of mind, contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, decision, persistence,

mindfulness, equanimity, and attention — watching each one arise, remain, and subside, and drawing the general conclusion: "So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play. Having been, they vanish." For the two most refined attainments — the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, and the cessation of feeling and perception — this kind of real-time observation isn't possible; instead, one reviews the qualities that were present only after emerging from the attainment. This capacity to inspect a state of becoming from the inside, factor by factor, is precisely the skill jhāna is meant to cultivate.

A structured set of corrosive perceptions and their rewards. Beyond the three most commonly cited perceptions — inconstancy, stress, and not-self — the texts offer a fuller list of ten: inconstancy, not-self, unattractiveness of the body, drawbacks (of the body's many vulnerabilities to disease and decay), abandoning (of arisen unskillful thoughts), dispassion, cessation, distaste for every world, the undesirability of all fabrications, and mindfulness of breathing. Each of the first three is paired, elsewhere, with a list of specific rewards for cultivating it: the perception of inconstancy is said to make all fabrications appear unstable, keep the mind from delighting in any world, and incline the heart toward Unbinding; the perception of stress is compared to

establishing disenchantment “like a murderer with a drawn sword,” decisively cutting the mind’s habitual infatuation; and the perception of not-self is said to stop all “I-making” and “my-making,” ending the very habit of self-construction at its root. A vivid simile compares a practitioner using these perceptions to an archer who has trained on a straw target until able to fire accurately and rapidly at real distances: having seen the aggregates as inconstant, stressful, diseased, a cancer, an arrow, alien, and empty, the mind “turns away” from them and inclines instead toward the deathless — sometimes reaching the full ending of the effluents on the spot, sometimes falling just short and being assured, instead, of a final rebirth in the Pure Abodes, never to return to any lower world again.

The endpoint of this practice is described, famously, in instructions given to the monk Bāhiya: in the seen, let there be only the seen; in the heard, only the heard; in the sensed, only the sensed; in the cognized, only the cognized — and when that is achieved, “there is no you in connection with that,” and therefore “no you there,” and therefore — since there is no “there” — “neither here, nor yonder, nor between the two.” A companion passage from the Udāna traces the same logic in causal terms: dependency produces wavering; independence removes wavering; the absence of wavering produces calm;

calm removes desire; the absence of desire removes coming and going; the absence of coming and going removes arising and passing away — and where there is no arising or passing away, there is no location at all. This explains the Buddha's famous, deliberately paradoxical answer to a deity who asked how he crossed the flood: neither by pushing forward nor by staying in place — pushing forward, he was swept away; staying in place, he sank.

With this, the tasks belonging to each of the four noble truths — comprehending stress, abandoning its origination, directly realizing its cessation, and developing the path — are complete, and the passage that opened the whole inquiry can close it: "Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no renewed becoming."

Chapter 7: No Location, No Limitation

The book closes by gathering three analogies used to describe a mind that has gone beyond becoming altogether.

The reversed field analogy. If kamma is the ground, consciousness the seed, and craving the moisture, then a mind that has fully abandoned passion for form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness has cut off the very support that would let consciousness "land" anywhere at all. Not landing, not growing, not fabricating anything further, it is described as released — and, in that release, steady; steady, contented; contented, unagitated. Canonical texts describe this happening in (at least) three related modes: while alive, sensing the six senses but with no passion, aversion, or delusion coloring the experience; at the moment of death, as the six senses simply grow cold, unrelished; and — in a striking testimony attributed to the disciple Sāriputta — even as a describable meditative attainment in this very life, in which awareness continues without being percipient of any of the conventional supports (earth, water, fire, wind, the formless spheres, this world, or any other world), yet is not simply blank: one perception ("the cessation of becoming, Unbinding") arises as the previous one fades, the way one flame in a woodchip fire gives way to the next.

The burnt-seed analogy. A second image addresses a puzzle: if an arahant (a fully awakened person) still acts in the world — eating, teaching, walking — how can this activity avoid producing further becoming? The Buddha's answer: like a seed already burnt to ash and scattered to the wind or washed away in a stream, action performed without greed, aversion, or delusion is "destroyed at the root" even as it occurs — deprived of any capacity to sprout into a future result, even though the action itself still visibly takes place. This is why an arahant can still be described, elsewhere, as continuing to practice generosity, virtue, and jhāna, and as still consuming food and being sensitive to sense experience (the "Unbinding property with fuel remaining") — but doing so in a way categorically different from an unawakened person's engagement with the same activities, illustrated by the image of a skillfully flayed cow: technically still covered by its own hide, but genuinely disjoined from it. After death, all further contact with the six senses ends completely (the "Unbinding property with no fuel remaining").

The light-beam analogy. A third image raises the deepest question of the book: is there anything at all that survives the complete cessation of the six senses at an arahant's death, or is total Unbinding simply annihilation? The Buddha compares consciousness, in this final image, to a beam of sunlight

entering a windowed room: ordinarily it lands on a wall; remove the wall, it lands on the ground; remove the ground, it lands on water; remove the water — it does not land anywhere at all. Applied to the four nutriments of consciousness (physical food, contact, intention, consciousness itself), the image suggests that where there is no passion or craving for any of these, consciousness simply does not land or grow — and yet the image of an unreflected light beam implies something that persists without a location, rather than something that has simply blinked out. This is supported by a separate passage describing "consciousness without surface, without end, luminous all around" — a mode of knowing not mediated by, or dependent on, contact with the elements or the senses at all, and therefore, by the Buddha's own logic of causality, not something that would cease when the elements and senses do. This is carefully distinguished from the ordinarily cultivable "radiant mind": the radiant mind is still a developed state of becoming with a locatable radiance, to be cultivated and then relinquished like any other factor of the path, while consciousness without surface has, by definition, nowhere to be pointed to at all.

Why the arahant is untraceable. Because such a mind does not land or settle anywhere, it cannot, strictly, be found — not by ordinary beings, not by beings

of great power, not even, according to one striking story, by Māra searching for the "consciousness" of a monk who has just died, precisely because that consciousness was never established anywhere to begin with. For the same reason, none of the four classical positions about a Tathāgata after death — that he exists, does not exist, both, or neither — actually applies, not because the truth is a fifth hidden option, but because all four assume that "the Tathāgata" is the kind of thing that could be be pinned down as identical with, or separate from, the aggregates in the first place, and that assumption itself has already been let go. The Buddha's own simile for this, given to the wanderer Vacchagotta: asking where an extinguished fire has gone — north, south, east, west — is a malformed question, because a fire's continued existence was always dependent on its fuel; once the fuel is entirely consumed and none is offered further, "gone out" is the only accurate description, and questions of directional relocation simply don't apply.

The story of Vakkali. When the Buddha and a group of monks find the monk Vakkali lying dead, having taken his own life, they notice a strange darkness moving in every direction around the body. The Buddha identifies it as Māra, searching for Vakkali's consciousness in order to determine where it has been "established" — and explains that it is precisely *because* Vakkali's

consciousness was never established anywhere that he was able to become fully unbound. The story functions as a narrative counterpart to the light-beam analogy: a mind with nowhere to land cannot be tracked to a location, even by a being with Māra's powers of perception.

The exchange with Anurādha. In a related dialogue, the Buddha walks the monk Anurādha through each of the five aggregates, asking in turn whether the Tathāgata (an epithet for a fully awakened being) should be regarded as identical with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, or consciousness; as existing within any of them; as existing apart from them; or as some composite or negation of all five. Anurādha answers no to every option. The Buddha's conclusion: since the Tathāgata cannot be pinned down as a reality even during his lifetime, it is not fitting to declare that he exists after death, does not exist, both, or neither — not because a hidden fifth answer is being withheld, but because the entire framework of the question no longer has anything to attach to. "Both formerly and now," the Buddha says, "it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress."

Three things that can still be said, positively. Although ordinary categories fail to capture Unbinding, the texts do offer three positive characterizations. It is **Suchness** (*tathatā*) — an imperturbable evenness with respect to whatever

is seen, heard, sensed, or known, likened to a lake free of mud or a stone temple pillar, undisturbed because there is no effort of maintaining equanimity left to be disturbed. It is **pleasure** (*sukha*) — repeatedly and explicitly affirmed to be genuinely pleasurable, in a well-known exchange where Sāriputta insists that the very absence of anything felt is itself the pleasure in question, since even the jhānas, one level after another, still carry a residual "affliction" by comparison. And it is **freedom** — captured in a recurring idiom describing the arahant as "everywhere released," meaning released from every possible spot, fabricated or unfabricated, where becoming could ever again take root.

The book's closing image, drawn from the verses of the monk Revata on the point of his own death, brings the whole argument full circle: no delight in dying, no delight in living, only the release that comes from a mind that no longer needs anywhere at all to stand.

Glossary of Key Terms

Bhava (becoming). A felt sense of identity operating inside a world organized around a particular desire; a dynamic, repeatedly-produced process rather than a fixed state of existence. The central subject of this book.

Vibhava (non-becoming). The desire for something that currently exists to end, perish, or be destroyed. Named in the second noble truth alongside craving for sensuality and craving for becoming as one of the three forms of craving that must be abandoned.

Kamma (Sanskrit: karma). Intentional action, together with the results of past intentional action. Functions as the "field" in the central analogy of this book — the range of possibilities, inherited from the past and generated in the present, from which a state of becoming can grow.

Taṇhā (craving). Literally "thirst." The "moisture" in the field analogy — the factor that selects a location within the field of kamma and activates its potential to grow into a state of becoming. Divided into craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

Upādāna (clinging). The act of taking hold of a location selected by craving and fashioning a sense of self around it. Divided into four types: clinging to sensuality, to views, to habits and practices, and to doctrines of self.

Khandha (aggregate). One of five categories — form, feeling, perception, fabrications (mental formations, including intention), and consciousness — that together constitute the raw material from which a sense of self can be fashioned. Not, on this reading, a definition of what a person *is*, but an analysis of what a person's sense of self is *built from*.

Jhāna (meditative absorption). A state of strong concentration, secluded from sensuality and from unskillful mental qualities, unfolding in four progressively more refined stages. Central to this book's argument because it is a form of becoming — and therefore, paradoxically, the necessary tool for ending becoming.

Arūpa-jhāna (formless attainment). Four still more refined states built on the fourth jhāna by systematically dropping perceptions of form: the dimensions of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana (knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be). The specific kind of insight, based on concentration, that the

Buddha identifies as constituting Awakening — seeing phenomena simply as they have arisen, without either delighting in their continuation or their destruction.

Atammayatā (non-fashioning). Declining to construct a sense of self, whether exalted or diminished, around any experience or attainment, no matter how refined — including the refined equanimity of the formless jhānas and even the experience of the deathless itself.

Nibbāna / Unbinding. The cessation of the craving and clinging that produce becoming, and, by extension, the ending of the entire process of becoming itself. Described in the texts not as annihilation but as release, marked by three positive qualities: Suchness, pleasure, and freedom from every possible location.

Tathāgata. An epithet for a fully awakened being ("one truly gone" or "one who has arrived at things as they are"), used in several of the book's culminating passages to explore what, if anything, can meaningfully be said about an awakened person's status after death.

The Seven Key Passages at a Glance

The author organizes the whole book around seven canonical passages, each supplying one turn in the argument:

1. **The first sermon (SN 56:11)** states the paradox in outline: craving for becoming and non-becoming are both named as causes of suffering, while the fourth noble truth's "duty" hints at a strategic way through, and the Buddha's own claim to Awakening hints at what lies beyond both.
2. **The dialogue with Ānanda (AN 3:76)** and **the standing-consciousness discourse (SN 22:54)** give the two field analogies explaining how becoming is produced from kamma, consciousness, and craving, and delineate the three levels — sensual, form, and formless — on which it occurs.
3. **The "adhering, slipping past, and seeing" passage (Iti 49)** sets out the strategy for avoiding both craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming: seeing what has come to be simply as what has come to be.
4. **The instruction to develop concentration (SN 56:1)** points to the paradoxical element in that strategy: the state of becoming —

concentration — that has to be cultivated in order for the strategy to function at all.

5. **The teaching to Kaccāyana (SN 12:15)** describes the mode of perception, grounded in concentration, that carries the strategy through to completion — right view freed from the polarity of existence and non-existence.
6. **The analogy of the ray of sunlight (SN 12:64)** offers a picture of consciousness once it has been freed from the limitations of becoming: a beam that, finding no surface to land on, simply does not land — without thereby being extinguished.

Reading and Reflection Questions

These questions are offered as prompts for further study, following the chapter structure above.

Introduction. In what sense can two people standing in the same physical location be said to inhabit different "worlds"? Can you identify a moment in your own recent experience when a shift in desire visibly reorganized your sense of the surrounding situation?

Chapter 1 (Two Stories). What does the story of the first Brahmā suggest about how mistaken beliefs about oneself can arise honestly, from limited information, rather than from deliberate dishonesty? How does the flavor-earth story complicate any simple line between "internal" psychological change and "external" cosmological or environmental change?

Chapter 2 (Two Analogies). Why is craving specifically defined as a *locating* function, rather than simply as wanting in general? Can you think of an example, from your own experience, of wanting something to end that still functioned as a form of "watering" — that is, that still produced a fresh state of identity or preoccupation, even though its object was negative?

Chapter 3 (Three Levels). Why does the text insist that unskillful sensual kamma is a more severe obstacle to spiritual progress than the mere presence of pleasant sensual experience? What practical difference does this distinction make?

Chapter 4 (Four Clingings). Of the four types of clinging — sensuality, views, habits and practices, and self-doctrines — which do you find easiest to notice in your own mind, and which is hardest? What does the theme of "mutuality" suggest about trying to work on just one type in isolation?

Chapter 5 (Two Incorrect Paths, One Incomplete). Why does the Buddha treat the "supreme viewpoint external to the Dhamma" so much more favorably than either the cosmic-self view or the Niganṭha path, despite still ultimately rejecting it as sufficient on its own? What distinguishes the monk who succeeds from the one who doesn't in the Ānanda dialogue?

Chapter 6 (One Way Out). In what sense is concentration (jhāna) described as both part of the problem and part of the solution? How does the concept of non-fashioning (atammayatā) address the risk that insight practice itself could become a new object of clinging?

Chapter 7 (No Location, No Limitation). Why does the text insist that "reappears," "does not reappear," "both," and "neither" all equally fail to

describe an awakened being after death? What work is being done by the three positive qualities — Suchness, pleasure, and freedom — given that so much of this chapter proceeds by negation?

Why the Paradox Matters for Practice

It would be easy to read all of this as a purely technical puzzle about Pāli vocabulary, but the author is explicit that the stakes are practical, not merely scholarly. Anyone who takes up meditation eventually runs into some version of the paradox described in these chapters. A student is told to let go, to stop clinging, to want nothing — and then notices, honestly, that the very effort to let go is itself a kind of wanting; that the wish for calm is still a wish; that watching one's own mind requires forming, sustaining, and caring about a particular state of concentration. Without some account of how this apparent contradiction resolves, a sincere student can end up either giving up on formal practice altogether (since any effort seems to be self-defeating), or quietly slipping into one of the two failure modes surveyed in Chapter Five — either treating a subtly refined state of absorption as the final goal and settling there, or cultivating a grim, effortful equanimity that mistakes suppression for release.

The book's answer is that this tension is not a flaw to be engineered away but the actual mechanism the path runs on. Concentration is a designed, temporary scaffold: a state of becoming built with full awareness that it is a state of becoming, used to observe every other state of becoming clearly

enough that craving for it loses its grip — and then, in the end, applied to itself as well. The practical instruction that falls out of this is less about achieving a perfectly desireless state from the very first sitting, and more about learning to notice, with increasing precision, exactly where delight has quietly taken up residence — in a pleasant sensation, in a sense of progress, in the calm itself — and gently declining to build a self around it, again and again, until the building stops on its own.

A note on the "Three Characteristics." Later Buddhist tradition often speaks of impermanence, stress, and not-self as the "Three Characteristics" of all existence — fixed marks stamped on every possible experience. The author flags this as a potentially misleading shorthand: the earliest texts never actually use the word "characteristic" (lakkhaṇa) for these three; they pair the same three terms only with "perception" and "contemplation," i.e., with mental tools deliberately picked up and applied, not passive descriptions true at all times regardless of context. This matters practically because pleasure, and a meaningful degree of control over one's actions, are also real — otherwise the entire project of practicing a path would make no sense. The Buddha's own guidance was to apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self when doing so is beneficial and timely (typically, once a stable

base of concentration is already in place, to counter the mind's habitual infatuation), and to emphasize the pleasurable, workable side of experience at other times (for instance, when first establishing the confidence and ease a beginning student needs to keep practicing at all). Treating the three as a rigid, universal description of reality — rather than as tools to be picked up for a specific, timely purpose — risks turning a skillful means into just one more view to cling to.

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Khuddaka Nikāya and related texts: Khp 4 (Novice's Questions); Dhp 92–93, 94–96, 160, 203, 235, 277–279, 322–323, 348 (Dhammapada); Ud 1:10, Ud 3:1, Ud 3:2, Ud 3:10, Ud 5:1, Ud 8:4 (Udāna); Iti 44, Iti 49, Iti 63, Iti 69, Iti 90 (Itivuttaka); Sn 1:12, Sn 3:12, Sn 4:1, Sn 4:4, Sn 4:5, Sn 4:6, Sn 4:8, Sn 4:9, Sn 4:10, Sn 4:15, Sn 5:2, Sn 5:6 (Sutta Nipāta); Thag 11, Thag 14:1, Thag 14:2 (Theragāthā); Thig 14 (Therīgāthā); Mv.I.23 (Mahāvagga).

This abridgment condenses and paraphrases the argument and structure of the source text; direct canonical citations are referenced by their traditional locations (e.g., SN 56:11, MN 1) rather than quoted at length, and readers seeking the full text and translations of the source suttas are encouraged to consult the complete work and the Pāli Canon translations on which it draws.